

# music

## On the lives of Kate Smith, Albert

By Irving Washington

Remember Dylan?

Bob Dylan has become the Greta Garbo of rock. Since his near-fatal (2nd near-fatal) 1966 accident, the one-time motorcycle black madonna two-wheel gypsy queen has almost vanished, like some idiot child forgotten and locked away in the attic.

That '66 motorpsycho nightmare, leaving Dylan sprawled and partially paralyzed on a Woodstock highway, was as steeped in futility as another '60's highway disaster, the latter snuffing out the life of Albert Camus after thirty years of fervent denial of the existence of the absurd.

The paper-back waif of a Woody Guthrie who drifted into Greenwich Village to edit himself down to hard-back Dylan quickly established himself as the master of the acerbic polemic that characterized the civil rights era. Dylan created the lyric fiber for the Great American Apocalyptic either/or paradigm. His mutation to electrified rock was greeted with typical American schizophrenia (Adulation at Newport, tomatoes and garbage at Forest Hill. Remember schizophrenia? Yes. No.), but his brilliant surreal lyric flights elevated rock from tennypopdom. (Robbie Robertson of The Band, Dylan's former back-up entourage, probably most succinctly summed up his mammoth influence on rock: "We were used to backin' up guys who sang things like 'Wa bob a lu bop.' When all those words started tumblin' out of Bob's mouth, we didn't know what to think.")

Yet, in '66 it appeared that Dylan, like some electric-haired Richard Corey, had done himself in, had crushed the framework of his own impossible equation. Dylan had taken, as Jerry Garcia said of Janis Joplin "that skyrocket trip... all the way up... and out."

Dylan's debacle came at the apex of his career, shortly after the release of *Blonde on Blonde*, perhaps the finest two-record set in rock history. The vacuous year that followed was filled with ricocheting rumors: Dylan was dead, Dylan was paralyzed, Dylan was a

vegetable with a face totally covered with hair.

Dylan finally emerged in late '67 at a Woody Guthrie Memorial, quite alive, unparalyzed, with a softer, acoustic approach, a deeper, richer, smokeless voice and a bearded, gnarled face that spoke of too much knowledge, too fast.

The superb, subdued *John Wesley Harding* was released shortly, followed a year later by *Nashville Skyline* in which Dylan turned a thoroughly country corner, dragging half of his contemporaries with him.

Dylan's personal appearances continued to be almost non-existent, but his two post-wreck albums offered both promise and hope. He seemed to be happily pattering along on the slow train through his back pages, turning out interesting, competent music, though not quite up to the quality level maintained in his first seven albums through *Blonde on Blonde*. (Dylan, in an otherwise throw-away interview in *Rolling Stone*, admitted "I thought I'd get up after that wreck and start doing what I'd always been doing. I found out I couldn't do that.") The remainder of the interview consisted of the compendium of put-ons and "aw shuck's" that have earmarked Dylan interviews. Once, when cornered by tv creature Les Crane's pointed search for "meaningful dialogue," ("Do you consider your career a success?") Dylan stared blankly at his hands, squinted, blinked hard, looked up and deadpanned, "Well, no, I always wanted to be a movie usher, and I haven't done that. I'd have to say my life has been a complete failure.") Then came *Self-Portrait* and Dylan seemed to falter, then stumble and fall beneath the thunder of Pamplona. The two-record set was clearly his Bay of Pigs. I heard it and went out to my favorite wall and wrote "WHAAAAAAT?"

The album was filled with Dylan's new mellow, boring-as-hell crooning, tackling such vapid gems as "Blue Moon" (Exchangeable at your local Memory Lane Mart for four Perry Como v-neck sweaters, one Bing Crosby briar, a Guy

Lombardo pocket handkerchief, or Kate Smith's training bra.)

True, *Self-Portrait* flashed occasional muscle in "Minstrel Boy," "Days of 49," and in an inexplicably effective piece of cotton candy, "Copper Kettle." On the whole though, Dylan sounded like one of his tired horses in the sun, totally unable to get any runnin' done. Surprisingly few of the compositions were Dylan originals, and several of those ("Alberta" and Little Sadie") were repeated in several outtakes of the same songs, an obvious device used to fill the album. Dylan even mustered the temerity to steal the ancient "It Hurts Me Too" and claim authorship. The cruelest cut, through, came in Dylan's throw-away rendition of the classic "Like a Rolling Stone." When there's too much of nothing, nobody should look.

*Self-Portrait* sounded sadly like the sound track for a Cecil B. DeMille production based on a Wayne Newton nocturnal emission.

Public reaction was widely divergent. For an album decidedly steeped in mediocrity, response was heavily hyperbolic. Critics either fell all over themselves praising Dylan's "new art form" or proclaiming "The Death of Bob Dylan."

The intensity of public reaction can only be understood against a background of the role Dylan has been meted by the public. He, like the rest of us, is a prisoner of his own dimensions. Yet, his brilliant scribbles on the fourth wall of the prison gave the illusion of possible transcendence. Dylan somehow enunciated the hopes and fears of an entire race, a one-man t-group, and somehow I don't think any of us will ever feel so alone again. (Or, as the Dylan lyric in a cut from his first album, "Talkin' New York" says "New York Times said it wuz the coldest winter in 17 years. I didn't feel so cold then.")

So, Dylan, a Jewish kid from Minnesota, scaled the cold cliffs of American mythology. Short, scrawny and sporting a voice one early critic called "the howl of a dog, its' rear leg caught in barbed wire," his excellence was sheer

triumph of the will. Yet, his left-handed charisma became defied, and we all know what happens to a good diety gone bad. Makes you want to wash your hands of the whole mess.

We expect inordinate, superhuman efforts from our golden calves, and when we don't get them, as in *Self-Portrait*, we are often vicious, brutal, and violent, a pack of wild bitches, spurned in heat.

Dylan has never been comfortable in this role of super-culture hero. He was visibly shaken when people began to touch him. The Band's "Stage Fright" was written for Dylan and just about says it all: "See the man with the stage fright?/Just tryin' to get in on with all his might/but he got caught in the spotlight/but when he gets to the end/he wants to start all over again. . . Now when he says that he's afraid/take him at his word/and for the price that the poor boy's paid/he has to sing just like a bird."

His disdain for the role thrust upon him was only exacerbated by the Woodstock highway breakdown. With *Self-Portrait* it appeared the Garbo analogy had been realized, that Dylan's music was to be as monastically distant as its maker, sliding into the realm of myth, with only a past to look forward to.

With the release of *New Morning*, though it appears that Dylan's back, though not as far as I'd prefer. With *New Morning* we get back about as far as the three kings of Dylan's surreal fable from the *John Wesley Harding* liner notes: "Not too far, but just far enough so's we can say we've been there."

Dylan's early music came from the edge of the abyss; *Self-Portrait* tried to fill the abyss with things. *New Morning* seems based on home movies of the abyss.

*New Morning* was recorded predominantly in Nashville, with arrangements occasionally reminiscent of *Blonde on Blonde*. The album leans much more toward rock than in the previous two outings, though in the products of artist such as Dylan, Van Morrison, etc., searches for the sources prove fruitless. It

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published in the Federal Register: that was on a Saturday, and inspectors were told to collect fines the following Monday, even though not a single coal operator had been given copies of the penalty schedule or provided an opportunity to comment on it. The operators had not, in fact, even received copies of the law.

In mid-April, representatives of the small operators from the National Independent Coal Operators Association went to Washington and met quietly with Senators Cook and Cooper of Kentucky. They were predicting "economic ruin" if the new law were enforced; they said they were considering testing the law's constitutionality. Over at the Interior Department, they met with an attorney named William Gershuny, who had drafted the penalty schedule. Gershuny -- who later told a member of Hechler's staff that he knew the schedule was "illegal" when he drafted it, but needed to get something in writing -- apparently encouraged the idea of testing the law. With no need for further encouragement, the operators filed suit in federal district court in Abingdon, Va., charging Interior with "arbitrary and capricious" enforcement of the law and asking a restraining order against many of the safety regulations -- and the penalty schedule.

The federal government's performance in its own defense in the courthouse at Abingdon was remarkable. The Justice Department lawyer who handled the case was either unfamiliar with the mine law or uninterested in it. He ignored Section 513, which states that

"...no justice, judge, or court of the United States shall issue any temporary restraining order or preliminary injunction restraining the enforcement of (any man-

datory health or safety) standard pending a determination of such issue on its merits."

No such determination was made -- and it could hardly have been made, because back in Washington, undersecretary Russell expressly prohibited any Bureau of Mines technical or legal experts from attending the Abingdon hearing. Thus the government offered no defense against the NICOA operators, and the judge granted a 10-day temporary restraining order. Although the Bureau still had the authority to make inspections and close mines in cases of imminent danger, all federal inspectors were ordered back to their offices over the following weekend to await "instructions" from Washington. The next week, the government waived its right to a hearing on a permanent injunction. The injunction was issued, and trial was set for November. Included in the injunction was Interior's penalty schedule -- and, in Interior's view, this meant that no fines would be collected for at least the next seven months. The collective sigh of relief among small operators was audible all across the coal-fields.

All through the summer, inspectors -- feeling like federal yo-yo's as they were hauled up and down by the Bureau, Interior, and the courts -- visited mines and issued notices of violation which they knew would be ignored since no penalties were being collected (although other federal judges suggested that the Abingdon injunction was valid only in that district, Interior chose to apply it everywhere, arguing rather incredibly that to enforce the law against some operators, while others en-